

Wear Your CROWN: How Racial Hair Discrimination Impacts the Career Advancement of Black Women in Corporate America

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This research explored the intersection of being Black, a woman, and wearing natural hair in a leadership role through the lens of intersectionality and phenomenology. This qualitative phenomenological research study used the theoretical framework of intersectionality and in-depth interviews to explore racial hair discrimination, current employment practices, and legislation that influence leadership advancement opportunities of 10 Black women working in corporate America. The participants interviewed provided a glimpse of the daunting measures Black women must employ in the workplace to navigate the discrimination practices experienced when wearing their natural hair. The findings in this study support the proposition that racial discrimination against wearing natural hair negatively affects the availability of professional opportunities to Black women as well as their career trajectories and overall self-esteem. The hope for the future is that federal legislation such as the Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (CROWN) Act will ensure that Black women may be able to have one less employment barrier to overcome.

Keywords: intersectionality, racial hair discrimination, CROWN Act, natural hair, workforce diversity

INTRODUCTION

Increased workforce diversity brings new challenges for organizations and Black women. Black women account for a generous part of the workforce (Johnson, 2019), accounting for 60.5% of women working in America in 2019, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020). Even though Black women are a significant population of the workforce, Black women represent merely 1.3% of senior leadership roles, compared to the 29% occupied by White women in S&P 500 companies (Smith et al., 2019). Working in corporate America presents increased unique racial discrimination experiences for Black women (Smith et al., 2019). Employment racial discrimination is an ongoing problem that disproportionately affects Black women more than any other demographic of employees in the workforce (Jones, 2020). In 2019, the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) reported that 33% (23,976) of all discrimination claims were based on racial identity or racial characteristics (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2019).

Hair is a characteristic that all employees have and must manipulate for work. In the workplace, grooming policies are in place prohibiting and criminalizing natural hair styles which leads to racial

discrimination. Racial hair discrimination became a problem for organizations with the decision to manage employees' dress and appearance through grooming policies that ban natural Black hairstyles, such as braids, locks, or any style that is seen as unusual (Powell, 2018). Afro-textured or natural hair is a racial characteristic that is underrepresented, misunderstood, and discriminated against in corporate organizational culture (Berkemeyer, 2020). Black hair is viewed as exotic, risky, and immoral by employers (Koontz & Nguyen, 2020). Exclusions that prevent natural hairstyles in the workplace encourage Black women to compromise their cultural identity and assimilate to corporate America's Eurocentric standard of straight, silky hair (Greene, 2017; Orey & Zhang, 2019). Numerous employers mandate that Black women change how their natural hair is worn in the workplace, often requiring women to cut, cover, or use alternative styling techniques for employment opportunities (Greene, 2017). Women who decline to change the appearance of their natural hair experienced unfavorable performance evaluations, were overlooked for career advancement opportunities, or lost employment (Greene, 2017). To be successful in the workplace, Black women must adhere to corporate standards and grooming policies referred to as dress codes (Jackson, 2019). Over the last 40 years, when employees have taken civil actions, courts have continued to reaffirm employers' ability to discriminate against natural hair styles by referencing the employer's responsibility to enforce corporate grooming standards (Powell, 2018). For the last 150 years, employers have reinforced a trend that Black women have straightened hair and must continue to do so to be employed (Powell, 2018).

Recent changes in employment law have required adjustments in corporate dress code policies for natural hair. These shifts indicate that a social transformation is in progress of which employers should be aware (Triana et al., 2015). In 2019, the Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (CROWN) Act was passed and added more protections for Black hair. The CROWN Act focuses on natural hair discrimination in the form of corporate grooming policies and includes the terms "hair texture" and "protective hairstyles related to race" (Berkemeyer, 2020, p. 290). The CROWN Act provides additional protections for Black hair and the right to wear natural hair to work to preserve one's cultural identity. "The purpose of this Act is to institute definitions of race and national origin for Federal civil rights laws that effectuate the comprehensive scope of protection ... to eliminate race and national origin discrimination in the United States" (CROWN Act, 2020, p. 4). On September 21, 2020, the Congressional House of Representatives passed the Federal Bill H.R. 5309 CROWN Act of 2020. In March 2022, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the CROWN Act of 2022 to coincide with the other states that have already passed similar legislation, including New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, Colorado, Washington, Connecticut, New Mexico, Delaware, Nebraska, and Illinois. Thirty-six municipalities and 22 additional states have introduced legislation (Dove and the CROWN Coalition Applaud the U.S. House of Representatives for Passing the CROWN Act, 2022).

The CROWN Act was established to provide clarity about Black hair that was not covered in the interpretation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Greene, 2017). Currently, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) insists that race does not include one's personal characteristics, such as hair (Greene, 2017). The EEOC is responsible for enforcing federal laws that make it illegal to discriminate against a job applicant or an employee because of personal identity, such as race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or genetic information (Berkemeyer, 2020). Black women were denied jobs, terminated, threatened with disciplinary action, and passed over for career advancement opportunities by employers because courts ruled that hair is an immutable trait toward which Title VII prohibits discrimination (Berkemeyer, 2020).

Racial discrimination impacts an employer's capability to recruit, retain, or promote top talent and negatively impacts job satisfaction and overall organizational success (Triana et al., 2015). The lack of inclusive employee representation in demographics, including the representation of Black women in mid-to senior-level leadership positions is a problem (Bloch et al., 2021). Organizations may not be able to prevent all forms of racial discrimination in the workplace but understanding the factors that may influence the severity of perceived racial hair discrimination can help organizations become more successful in preventing it (Triana et al., 2015). Allowing Black women to wear their natural hair may be linked to increased productivity, and employers may thus notice a change in productivity if they allow natural hair in the workplace (Smith et al., 2019).

The implications of racial hair discrimination extend beyond wearing afros, locs, and braids because hair is often the evaluation rubric for Black women before performance is evaluated (Greene, 2017). Employers see natural hairstyles and automatically assume that Black women are unprofessional or unemployable (Jones, 2020). Employers may discriminate against Black women without intending to place them at a disadvantage. Black women are sent home from work for wearing natural hairstyles 1.5 times more than White women in the workforce (Mbilishaka et al., 2020). Organizational leaders unconscious bias creates a culture that undermines the competence and management abilities of Black women which negatively impacts career opportunities (Ersikine et al., 2021). To overcome the stigma related to natural hair, Black women must put in more effort to yield higher results simply to receive favorable performance evaluations, comparable to their White peers, that can lead to career advancement opportunities (Bloch et al., 2021).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to analyze and evaluate how natural hair discrimination against Black women in leadership roles impacted their career advancement opportunities. Most women leadership theories are drawn from White women and simply applied to all women (Smith et al., 2019). Black women are not accurately understood, and more information is needed to understand Black female leaders' racial experience and the barriers that prevent career advancement, although they are competent and have an ardent desire to fill these roles (Smith et al., 2019). This research strived to comprehend the views of individuals who experienced workplace discrimination in corporate America because they were Black and judged because of their natural hair. Until more is known about Black women in positions of leadership, Black hair discrimination will continue to impact organizational culture and productivity, and natural hairstyles will be an obstacle for professional competence and organizational fit (Dawson & Karl, 2018).

This study was conducted by using a phenomenological lens to discover the lived experiences of Black women who experienced racial hair discrimination. The research study began by recruiting participants via purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Both active and passive recruitment strategies were used to target the widest audience of the population. Once potential participants were identified, they were emailed an invitation to participate in this research study and acknowledged that they met the identified criteria to participate in the research topic. Once selected, participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they had the option to refrain from participating at any time during the process. Participants were informed that their participation required two separate Zoom interviews that lasted up to 60 minutes. Open-ended questions were used to gain enough knowledge about the participants to obtain a perceived in-depth understanding of their lived experiences that provided insights into the study. Participants gained a sense of self-fulfilment through participation and the knowledge that they added to the existing body of research. Once the interview process began, a script was used to establish standard protocol during the process. After a rapport was built with participants, the purpose of the study was explained to ensure that participants understood hair discrimination and how phenomenological research methods work.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework used for this study was intersectionality to understand the intersecting of race, gender, and ethnicity in corporate America. The study explored the career advancement barriers encountered by Black women due to hair racial discrimination that was influenced by social bias, racial stereotyping, and racial discriminatory employment policies within the workplace. According to Kimberlee Crenshaw (2010) intersectionality is a means of understanding multiple factors that interest and shape the perpetuation of social inequalities. The intersectionality framework allowed for mapping the way in which race intersects with gender, ethnicity, nationality, and other classifications (Crenshaw, 2010). Inequalities based on stereotypes associated with the appearance of natural hair in the workplace start with small biases

but lead to larger effects in hiring, performance evaluations, meetings, and assignments (Williams et al., 2020).

Intersectionality was used to interpret and examine the lives and stories of Black women in multiple social categories, considering that they are Black and female, at the micro level and intersect with oppression of racial hair discrimination at the macro level (Crenshaw, 2010). Black women who work in White organizations often experience forms of unconscious bias that are either intentional or unintentional; however, the effects are still the same on career advancement opportunities for Black women (Erskine et al., 2021). Hair discrimination has been a documented issue for Black women since 1964 and continues to be an issue with continued criticism and judgment for having a hair texture different from that of White American counterparts (Berkemeyer, 2020). Black hair is seen as unacceptable in mainstream American culture and continues to present numerous employment barriers for Black women because employers continue to state that natural hair will not be allowed in the workplace (Kennedy, 2020). Black women experience greater negative combined stereotypes from being both female and Black, which are likely to lead to unfair treatment and a lack of career advancement opportunities (Lee et al., 2020). Microaggressions and other forms of racial hair discrimination create an alternative barrier for Black women because these actions reduce workplace satisfaction and lead to a decrease in workplace production, potentially causing economic loss for both organizations and employees (Whitaker, 2019). Emotional tax is an increased sensitive experience when Black women wear natural hair which is different from other work peers that creates an internal struggle to thrive, possess a healthy sense of well-being, and decreases productivity (Erskine et al., 2021). These facets of racial discrimination impacting Black women's multiple identities were examined through the lenses of intersectionality.

The use of intersectionality as a framework was used to address the multiple intertwining influences of factors for racial discrimination and sexism (Bloch et al., 2021). Intersectionality captures that a Black woman may experience numerous types of discrimination simultaneously, as the facets of the woman's identities are interconnected and cannot be examined separately from one another (Windsong, 2018). More research is needed to better understand the intersectionality of gender and racial hair discrimination on Black female leaders. A better understanding of the factors contributing to racial hair discrimination among Black females working in management positions will create increased awareness of employment practices in organizational development and business management. Several studies have demonstrated the effects of being Black (race) and a woman (gender) on career opportunity outcomes, such as compensation, perception of competency to fill the leadership role, and unfair treatment (Smith et al., 2019). However, these studies have not addressed the experience of the perception of hair discrimination in the workplace for Black female leaders.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design because phenomenology studies are more commonly used in analyzing individuals' lived experiences of racial hair discrimination (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A qualitative phenomenological approach was utilized to understand how racial discrimination against Black women in leadership roles based on hair remains pervasive. The qualitative phenomenological method was employed because the goal of the study was to understand the phenomenon of racial discrimination in the workplace based on hair. This research explored the intersection of being Black, a woman, and working in a leadership role through the lens of intersectionality and phenomenology. The design was implemented in three phases: selecting participants, collecting data, and data analysis. Participants who fit the criteria of Black, female, and working in a leadership position in corporate America were selected. The participants were required to have worn natural hair in the workplace at any point in their career, worked in a leadership role, and were able and willing to share the lived experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In the data collection process, participants were interviewed about their lived experiences to obtain rich data (Seidman, 2019). Two semi structured virtual interviews were used to collect information from participants through open-ended questions. Participants were asked to describe their individual experiences

through vivid descriptions and stories. The interviews were conducted to accurately capture the description of the experience. The interview questions were phenomenological in design and guided participants to share experiences, feelings, and beliefs. The interviews incorporated participants' stories and descriptions of their lived experiences of racial hair discrimination. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a combination of inductive and deductive analysis. In the data analysis phase, the data was verified for accuracy. Bracketing (epoché) was used to disclose personal beliefs, opinions, and experiences regarding the subject and to filter and segregate to minimize direct influence in the process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data was collected using purposive and snowball sampling of 10 Black women over the age of 18, with 5 or more years of leadership with multiple direct reports who have experienced any form of discrimination based on their race, gender, and hairstyle. These sampling methods were appropriate for a qualitative phenomenological study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Phenomenological studies are concerned with obtaining a deep understanding of a phenomenon, and all participants represented the population that has experienced the phenomenon being studied. The experiential data of the participants were collected through virtual meetings using semi structured interviews that were digitally recorded and transcribed (Seidman, 2019).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The qualitative research questions were appropriate for understanding the gap between racial hair discrimination in corporate America and Black women in leadership roles. The first question was central to understanding racial hair discrimination and the second builds on understanding the impact on career advancement opportunities.

***RQ1:** How do Black women working in leadership roles experience racial hair discrimination in corporate America?*

***RQ2:** How are the career advancement opportunities of Black women working in leadership roles impacted by wearing natural hairstyles in the workplace?*

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

All 10 participants worked in leadership positions and had worn natural hair at some point in their career. The participants lived in several locations within the United States. Six of the participants (60%) had lived and accumulated leadership experience in states other than the ones in which they were residing at the time of the interview. Four participants (40%) had more than 20 years of leadership experience, five (50%) had between 10 and 19 years of leadership experience, and one (10%) had six years of leadership experience. The participants occupied leadership positions at various levels, including leading entire organizations, large teams, and individual directors. Three participants (30%) had led an entire organization. The participants differed widely in age, education, and family status. One (10%) participant reported holding an associate degree, four (40%) reported holding a bachelor's degree, and five (50%) reported possessing a master's degree. Five (50%) of the participants were married, and seven (70%) had children. Each participant provided information that was vital to capturing the lived experiences of Black women who wear natural hair in corporate America.

During the interviews, all participants discussed their experiences of hair discrimination in the workplace as well as prospects and obstacles to promotion and career advancement.

EVALUATION OF THE FINDINGS

This study explored perceptions of racial discrimination based on hair against Black women in corporate America. One important goal of this study was to contribute to the understanding of

organizational leadership and business operations by examining the challenges that Black women who occupy leadership positions face. The research questions were used to develop the 10 questions that the participants answered in the interviews. Each of the themes was identified during the coding process, and the themes were broken down into categories of similar experiences. The evaluation of the findings produced four themes that were related to the questions. The four themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the participants' experiences were: (a) Theme 1: Microaggressions, (b) Theme 2: Unclear professional standards, (c) Theme 3: Career opportunities, and (d) Theme 4: Leadership issues with natural hair. Once the main themes were developed, five subthemes emerged. Those subthemes were based on the participants' responses and included (a) unwanted touching of natural hair, (b) deficits in self-confidence and doubt at work result from stereotypes, (c) conformity is used as a coping method, (d) professional trajectories impacted by hair styling, and (e) leading while wearing natural hair creates an identity shift. All the participants shared examples of hair discrimination and microaggressions as well as describing instances in which they had intentionally changed their hairstyle to apply for a promotion or to attend an interview.

RQ1: How Do Black Women Working in Leadership Roles Experience Racial Hair Discrimination in Corporate America?

Two themes that were related to this question emerged. First, Black women experience microaggressions when they wear natural hair at work. Second, organizations have unclear professionalism standards that create confusion and dissatisfaction in the workplace. Microaggressions and other forms of racial hair discrimination create an alternative barrier for Black women because these actions reduce workplace satisfaction and lead to a decrease in workplace productivity, potentially causing economic loss for both the organization and employees (Whitaker, 2019). The findings were consistent with the extant literature and align with the participants' responses to their personal encounters with discrimination. The participants provided examples similar to Opie & Phillips (2015) study where Black hair was not seen as professional as straight hair in the workforce. Black women encountered more issues in employment practices related to how their hair was worn (Blackshear & Kilmon, 2020). The research showed that the participants' responses were consistent with the literature in that natural Afrocentric hairstyles were viewed as less professional. There is a bias against Black hair in professional settings. Discriminatory stereotypes, biases, and unprofessionalism make wearing natural Black hair at work difficult. Hair-related biases proliferate because they are subjective. Black women are disproportionately affected by dress-code policies and are cast as rulebreakers when their hair does not meet subjective standards (Goodman, 2021).

The Black hair experience in corporate America encompasses a large part of the professional and performance standard that had been applied to the Black women who participated in the study. Table 1 explains how the primary themes and subthemes were correlated to research question one. The phrases and words that the participants used were coded into themes and subthemes to obtain a better understanding of the phenomenon under observation. The codes were developed by reference to the frequency with which sentiments and experiences occurred.

TABLE 1
RQ 1 PRIMARY THEMES/SUBTHEMES

RQ1	Primary themes	Subthemes	Codes
How do Black women working in leadership roles experience racial hair discrimination in corporate America?	Theme 1: Microaggressions	Unwanted touching of natural hair	Neat is subjective Perception of hair as being unprofessional Double standards Judgments
	Theme 2: Unclear professional standards	Deficits in self-confidence and doubt at work result from stereotypes Conformity is used as a coping method	Conformity to organization Attracts attention and unwanted touches Appearance being judged, discussed, or talked about Changes hairstyles often Questions constantly asked about hair

All 10 participants (100%) shared examples of workplace discrimination related to the wearing of natural hair. The results revealed that Black women in leadership roles experience hair discrimination because of the subjectivity of the professional standards that are applied to their hair, microaggressions, stereotypes, comments, biases, unwanted touching, judgment, and criticism. Hair discrimination affects Black women’s access to wealth through rescinding of job offers, denial of salary increases, and blocked career advancement opportunities (Robinson & Robinson, 2020). The research showed that this issue of styling hair is more than an aesthetic choice for the women who participated in this study. Overwhelmingly the results highlighted that despite being asked to change hairstyles, having their hair touched, or questioned about their natural hair many of the participants did not see these actions as overtly discriminatory. In fact, several of the participants educated their non-Black counter parts and changed their hairstyling to be accepted. The practice of microaggressions have become so routine that the behaviors were expected and, in some cases, accepted by the women interviewed. The underlying issue for the women in this study was why were non-Black female employees exempt from the same scrutiny and examination about hair in the workplace. The findings indicated that the experiences that Black women encountered daily included the ability to meet professional grooming standards, microaggressions while performing job tasks, prejudices about natural hair, and having their leadership competency questioned more than non-Black leaders. The next phase of the research entailed determining the effect of those microaggressions on the availability of career advancement and leadership opportunities for Black women.

RQ2: How Are the Career Advancement Opportunities of Black Women Working in Leadership Roles Impacted by Wearing Natural Hairstyles in The Workplace?

The participants spoke about their experiences of wearing natural hair before they could access advancement opportunities. They were asked about styling their hair differently and shared their experiences of pursuing workplace equality. Two additional themes emerged from these experiences,

namely Theme 3: Career Opportunities and Theme 4: Leadership issues with natural hair. Table 2 outlines how the primary themes and subthemes are correlated to research question two.

TABLE 2
RQ2 PRIMARY THEMES/SUBTHEMES

RQ2	Primary theme	Subthemes	Codes
How are the career advancement opportunities of Black women working in leadership roles impacted by wearing natural hairstyles in the workplace?	Theme 3: Career Opportunities	Professional trajectory is impacted by the styling of hair.	Asked to alter styling of hair
			Ethnic identity Angry Black women Diversity
	Theme 4: Leadership issues with natural hair	Leading while wearing natural hair creates an identity shift.	Desire to be seen as equal
			Tone down performance Acquiesce Stereotype influence CROWN Act

The participants noted that they had changed their hairstyles to access career advancement opportunities, that their competencies had been questioned, that they had been denied opportunities for promotion, and that they had elected to work for organizations that valued diversity and inclusion. Negative stereotypical notions have been found to produce organizationally significant outcomes, particularly in connection with recruitment and promotion decisions (Metinyurt et al., 2021). The first theme that emerged for RQ2 was that Black women changed the styling of their hair to access career advancement opportunities. The second theme that emerged was Black women’s leadership and competency were undermined when they wore naturally styled hair. The actions and statements of the participants revealed that they had had to change hairstyles to progress in their careers. The women felt they had to alter their appearance to be allowed to perform work for which they were qualified. Several of the participants discussed toning down or altering communication style and leadership strategy. The participants described changing their hairstyles to access opportunities and mentioned that the styling of their hair impacted those opportunities. Once the participants had obtained leadership positions, the styling of their natural hair continued to be a concern. The experiences of workplace discrimination that the participants described highlighted unique incidents and situations that they encountered in corporate America over the years. Table 3 describes the participants’ responses that were connected to the primary themes of workplace discrimination.

TABLE 3
PARTICIPANT RESPONSES TO WEARING NATURAL HAIR

Primary Themes	Number of Participant Responses	Percentage of Participant Responses
Microaggressions impacted work environment	8	80%
Unclear about professional standards	6	60%
Changed the styling of their hair for interviews and to access career advancement opportunities	10	100%
Leadership and/or competency were undermined when wearing natural hair	8	80%

Black women’s leadership skills have developed in response to gendered and racialized experiences (Newman, 2021). Decisions to make character changes such as these are based in reactions to stereotypes and biases (Blackshear & Kilmon, 2020). Black women endure psychological stressors because of the pressure to assimilate or to modify one’s appearances. They are forced to employ coping strategies to protect themselves from stereotypes and racial discrimination. Intersectionality allowed the participants in this study to be viewed distinctly through their separate identities. The stereotypes and discriminatory practices were influenced by the intersectionality of being Black, a woman and wearing natural hair (Hester et al., 2020). The Mintel research reported that 80% of Black women changed the styling of natural hair in the work environment (Mbilishaka et al., 2020). However, all 10 (100%) of the participants in this study stated that they changed the styling of their hair in the workplace. The experiences of the participants are consistent with intersectionality and the discriminatory employment practices that Black women encounter.

CONCLUSION

This study addressed the way natural-hair discrimination against Black women in leadership roles in corporate America alters their career advancement opportunities. The study examined the experiences and personal beliefs of 10 Black women through an intersectional phenomenological lens. The accounts of the participants expanded the literature and the academic understanding of the strategies that Black women in leadership roles used when they encounter racial discrimination based on hair. Specifically, the study focused on experiences of such forms of discrimination and their implications for career progression. The findings yielded four themes and five subthemes. Understanding how natural hair impacts work environments and career advancement opportunities for Black women is important for organizational outcomes and for addressing the underrepresentation of Black women in leadership roles.

Racial hair discrimination against Black women is a challenge that requires more research to analyze the implications of employment practices and their impact on career opportunities. The negative consequences of workplace hair discrimination may include overlooked talent, missed talent opportunities, lower productivity, and overall decrease in organizational success. Due to these concerns on organizational outcomes, hair discrimination must be explored in the fields of business administration and organizational development. Antidiscrimination laws, organizational policies, and organizations such as the EEOC exist to protect all employees from workplace discrimination; however, a gap has been identified in relation to natural hair. The problem continues to be perpetuated largely because Black hair was not previously a protected characteristic. Thus, the CROWN Act and increased knowledge about Black hair is needed to bring about change and prevent the effects of racial discrimination against Black women in positions of leadership. There was a crucial need for this qualitative phenomenological study because of the growing

trend of workplace racial hair discrimination and its implications for business organizations of decreased employee satisfaction, increased turnover, and being viewed as lacking diversity or socially irresponsible.

This research study sought to expand existing knowledge about Black women's experience of racial hair discrimination and the question of whether wearing natural hair affects their career advancement opportunities. This study shed light on the working conditions and lived experiences that affect Black women who wear natural hair. The study also highlighted that wearing natural hair limits the career advancement opportunities of Black women. Furthermore, the study described how Black women navigate hair discrimination employment practices within organizations. The findings captured the intersectionality of natural-hair discrimination, a barrier that Black women in leadership roles encounter in corporate America. The discussion was also shaped by the CROWN Act. All participants shared their profound insights into natural-hair discrimination. The hope is that the results will drive change and the emergence of more organizations to focus on change and equality in the workplace.

Business leaders and practitioners should consider the following recommendations when they examine current employment practices. To better understand Black women, organizations should prioritize reviewing recruitment and promotional policies, current employee handbooks, company policy and procedures and other official documents. These reviews should ensure that organizations become inclusive and responsive to all employees, including Black women. At present, organizations fail Black women by adopting ineffective policies on diversity and inclusion or by failing to adopt such policies altogether (Wingfield, 2019). Black women risk being denied employment or career advancement opportunities for promotion because of their race (Greene, 2021). Organizations should provide supervisors and managers with training and development policies that focus on equity and fair treatment of all employees. These trainings should emphasize that judgments on whether a hairstyle is professional must not be based on stereotypes, subjectivity, or Eurocentric perspectives on propriety. Organizations that have applied optimal diversity and inclusion programs have seen employees work more efficiently and teams operate with fewer barriers (Miller & Davis-Howard, 2022). Second, organizations should evaluate their current diversity and inclusion initiatives or create diversity programs that encompasses training specific to the psychological constructs that underlie attitudes to Black women's hair, which employers do not understand. Racial diversity and equity can be achieved when organizations genuinely focus on gender discrimination and hold managers accountable (Wingfield, 2019). Research has shown the positive outcomes of diversity programs including increased work group performance, reduced conflict, increased employee retention and employee commitment toward organizational success (Cheeks & Yancey, 2022).

The study findings add to the limited literature on natural hair discrimination against Black women in the workplace. The evidence in this study supports the proposition that racial discrimination against wearing natural hair affects the availability of professional opportunities for Black women as well as their career trajectories and overall self-esteem. This proposition is derived from the theory of intersectionality, which posits that the experiences of Black women are distinct from those of other demographics and that Black women are affected by a twofold bias based on both gender and race (Crenshaw, 1989). As larger numbers of Black women continue to climb the corporate ladder, hair is likely to become a contentious concern for employers. The passage of the CROWN Act is likely to elevate the importance of the matter in compliance. Supporters of banning hair discrimination have turned to states since these efforts have failed nationwide and efforts have stalled in Congress. While the federal Crown Act passed in the US House of Representatives in 2022, the act did pass in the Senate. As of July 2022, 18 states have signed legislation that explicitly prohibits racial discrimination related to hair and hopefully more will enact legislation to end race-based hair discrimination.

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